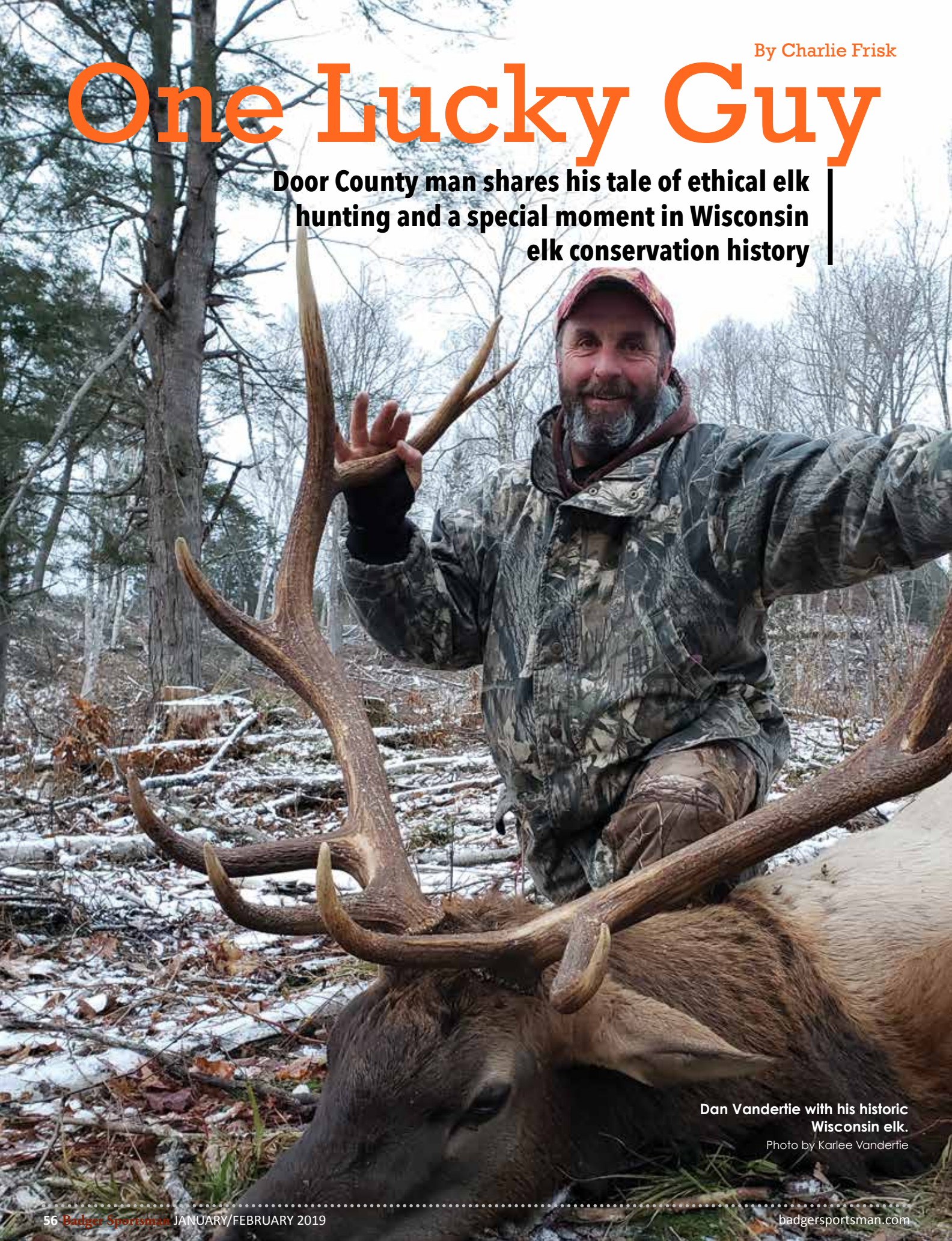


By Charlie Frisk

One Lucky Guy

Door County man shares his tale of ethical elk hunting and a special moment in Wisconsin elk conservation history



Dan Vandertie with his historic Wisconsin elk.

Photo by Karlee Vandertie

The fall of 2018 is one Dan Vandertie will never forget. Not only was he one of the four lucky recipients of a tag for Wisconsin's inaugural elk hunt, but he also hunted elk with his daughter, Karlee, on her first ever outing in Colorado. Karlee was the only successful hunter in their Colorado hunting group this year, harvesting a 5x5 bull with a single shot on opening day.

As for Vandertie's one and only opportunity to hunt elk in Wisconsin, he harvested a 6x6 bull, but the story leading up to it is even more remarkable.

A bumpy start

Once a hunter draws a Wisconsin elk hunting permit, they can never enter the lottery again, meaning this would be the only opportunity for the farmer from southern Door County to hunt elk in the state.

On Tuesday, Oct. 23, Vandertie headed to Clam Lake in Ashland County to start his hunt. He was accompanied by two friends, Troy Piostrowski, a taxidermist who owns New Life Taxidermy in Amherst, and Mitch Bemis, a bear hunter who knows the Clam Lake area like the back of his hand.

That first day they would see elk before light and after dark, but did not see elk during daylight shooting hours.

"On about Thursday noon the three of us looked at each other and said whatever we're doing, we're not doing it right," Vandertie said. "It's probably time to go to the bar."

What happened when they got to the bar illustrates what Dan said was the major factor in their eventual success.

"The best thing I did in this hunt was to talk to the local people," he said.

Vandertie has no trouble making friends and struck up a conversation with local residents patronizing Dows Corner Bar who circled areas to scout on his maps. They reported a bull on private property was tearing up a lady's apple trees, and they would seek permission for him to hunt her property.

Vandertie and his friends finished up their lunch and drove out to the private land. They knocked on the owner's door, but nobody answered. Just then, two cow elk walked out of the woods.

"I thought OK, we're doing something right. We've turned things around, we're on our way now," Vandertie said. "We got the binoculars out, we started watching, pretty soon there were five, six cows, a spike bull and a 3x3 bull."

"All of a sudden one of the guys says, 'look what's coming up behind that big rock,' and all we could see was the horns moving back and forth. We were sitting there, like 'Holy... this is a big guy. Wow!'"

The bull was a 7x7, meaning it has seven points on each antler. Unfortunately, Dan was unable to get permission due to the land exchanging hands recently, and he was only able to watch the bull from a distance.

Another attempt

Friday morning Mitch Bemis told Vandertie "We really got to go look for that big guy, I dreamt about him all night long."

That's exactly what they did. They went back to the same property and saw the big guy laying 100 yards from the road, but he was still on the same private land.

"So we drove around the area and then spent the rest of the day hunting on National Forest land, and never saw another elk," Vandertie said.

Vandertie and his party saw no elk the next few days, and by Sunday they followed up on another tip about a different 7x7 in the area. On the way out there, they spotted a herd of eight to 10 cows and a big 5x5 bull. Unfortunately, they were not presented with any good shots.

Late that afternoon, Vandertie needed to start venturing on the return trip home to Brussels. But he just couldn't get that 7x7 bull out of his mind, so he decided to go look one last time on the way home. As he drove by one of the farms he had permission to hunt, he saw two cow elk. He stopped to talk to the landowner, who invited him in the house to look through his spotting scope, and they saw the big bull about 300 yards from the house.

"My heart started beating, I thought this is it, I could get him," Vandertie thought. "We snuck out to the barn, we're looking around the corner, we set up a spotting scope, we're looking at him, wow is he big!"

The bull was about 300 yards away, but Vandertie didn't have a rangefinder to know for certain. Also, there was about a 10 mile an hour crosswind. He was about to make one of those decisions that only the most ethical sportsmen make.

"My heart started beating, I thought this is it, I could get him..."

"If he's right at 300 and I've got a rangefinder, I can make that shot, but what if I'm off by 50 yards? That's going to drop my shell by quite a bit again," Vandertie said. "I put my gun down, I looked at the landowner and said, 'nope, we're not doing it.' If I injure this guy and he gets away I would be sick. It's 5:30, I'm all by myself, so we left him go."

Vandertie got in his truck, drove home to work on the farm for 10 days, and never saw that big bull again.

A second chance

With the early portion of the elk hunting season closing on Nov. 11, Dan went back up to Clam Lake on Wednesday, Nov. 7 to give himself four more days to hunt before the season paused for the gun deer season.

Early after arriving back in the area, Vandertie talked with some of loggers who had been clear cutting part of the national forest. The loggers were helpful, explaining where they had logged recently and where they saw elk.

One of the loggers even told them, "About a week after we

start, the clear-cuts are like a lunch wagon on wheels. They're in there eating the green tops and whatnot and that is where they'll be."

That next morning after their arrival, Vandertie went to one of the clear cuts the loggers referenced and spotted two bulls, including one that was 6x6. He decided to pursue the 6x6 bull, but when he came within shooting range, he realized the big bull was within 20 yards of the road. He and his companions watched as the two bulls crossed the road and disappeared into the dark timber. They decided to drive away and come back in the afternoon.

While heading back to the cabin for lunch, they started seeing whitetail deer coming out of the woods all over the place.

"There was a storm coming, five to ten inches of lake effect snow off of Lake Superior, and we all agreed, 'everybody's going to move early tonight,'" Vandertie said.

So, they decided to set up their ground blind tent where they saw the 6x6 earlier in the day. With the wind in his face and a portable heater in the blind, Vandertie recalled sitting there for a bit less than two hours before seeing the big bull emerge to start grazing at about 180 yards.

"All of a sudden, the big bull caught a glimpse of the tent or something, and he swung his butt end over, and looked right at us. Quit chewing, he just stared at us," Vandertie said.

He and his friend Troy Piostrowski watched for about 10 minutes as the bull stared back at them. Then the bull started

chewing his cud and turned to start grazing again.

Vandertie estimated he watched the bull for a total of 20 to 30 minutes. Did it make him nervous?

"I wasn't. I was calm, with the shooting stick it held the gun so steady, you weren't floating all over the place," he said. "I turned the scope to the highest power, found my spot, and I said to Troy, 'OK, here we go.'"

Vandertie took a shot. The elk jumped, spun around and scampered 40 to 50 feet. He questioned whether he shot too low, so he squeezed off another shot.

"All of a sudden, I see his back legs do that little wobbly dance, and he rolled over, hit the ground and he was dead, never moved!" Vandertie didn't know it at the time, but he had made two consecutive kill shots. Both shots entered the body cavity and pierced the liver of the bull elk.

Celebrating victory

"Troy is high fiving me, slapping me, saying, 'Oh God, this is great.' We're watching him, letting everything slow down a bit, enjoying the moment, and I looked at Troy and said, 'I'm a little bit sad. I'll never get to hunt elk in Wisconsin again.'"

Vandertie called the state Department of Natural Resources to take their test samples from the elk. He also called his daughter, Karlee, who was off scouting another area. They took some pictures, then started cleaning the elk. Shortly thereafter, some local residents came to assist.

"Now it's dark and up pulls a pickup truck on the road, a



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guy's got a headlamp and he comes walking out. The guy said, 'I figured you guys were elk hunters when I heard that shot. I was bow hunting further back in. Wow, what a dandy, you guys need a hand getting this out of here?'"

Vandertie accepted. The guy made a phone call and in 15 minutes another six people came to provide additional assistance. They took over and were excited to just be a part of this special moment in Wisconsin conservation history.

The bowhunters had a big Otter sled, and in two trips hauled the elk out to Dan's truck. In about a half hour they accomplished what

would have taken Vandertie, his daughter, and his friend, Troy, several hours of hard work.

"I had the elk on the back of the tail gate and they all got their picture taken with it," he said.

Troy Piostrowski is mounting the bull, and Vandertie gave him permission to enter it in several taxidermy competitions. He also contacted the DNR and let them know that they can use the mount to publicize Wisconsin's elk program.

There were 38,000 hunters that entered the lottery for the elk permit in 2018. Vandertie hopes the publicity raised by exhibiting his bull and articles about his hunt will double that number in 2019, and in turn help fund conservation efforts to better serve the growing elk herds in Wisconsin's future. The next signup for the elk permit lottery will be in May 2019.

If you're interested in seeing Wisconsin's elk, plan a trip to Clam Lake, the self-proclaimed elk capitol of Wisconsin. You might have a hard time finding elk during the middle of the day, but they are out feeding in the early morning and late evening. If you need help locating the elk, there is no better place to go than the Dows Corner Bar on State Highway 77. Someone there is sure to know where the elk are located.

Charlie Frisk is a retired biology and environmental science teacher from Green Bay. He is an active hunter and angler and volunteers with several environmental organizations in Wisconsin. He also spends considerable time whitewater canoeing and cross-country skiing. Frisk has written articles for Fur-Fish-Game, Gundog, Spaniels in the Field, Silent Sports and Wisconsin Outdoor Journal.



The gang that helped Vandertie get his elk out of the woods near Clam Lake.

Photo by Karlee Vandertie